Introduction

The history of southeastern New Mexico and the far west Texas area remains one of the great untold stories of the American West. Despite its vast historical importance, the region has been poorly represented in historical literature. No champion or storyteller has emerged to defend it against claims of marginality, to carry its tales to an enthusiastic public, or to give the region an identity as has the Gold Rush Country of California, the vaunted buttes of the northern plains, or the once-deep grasses of the Great Plains.

In the history of New Mexico, the southeastern part of the state is often slighted in favor of the Rio Grande corridor and the Rio Abajo and the Rio Arriba regions to the north, where the Spanish *conquistadores* came, where the Pueblo peoples rose against them, where trappers came across the mountains to first scandalize and then mix into *Nuevo Mexicano* culture. Texas history focuses on the plains of west Texas, famed as the *Llano Estacado*, the Staked Plains of ranching lore. That dominates the stories of the western portion of the state, as most of Texas remains taken with the image of the Alamo and the Texas War of Independence. Such events provide the inspiration that drives Texas mythology. In most histories of Texas, the trans-Pecos region is portrayed as marginal. Texans regard the Alamo, the massacre at Goliad, the Battle of San Jacinto, the gusher at Spindletop, and dozens of other places and events as central to their heritage, but the drama of the trans-Pecos is not among them.

Yet this region of far west Texas and far southeastern New Mexico has a valuable and important history that mirrors the vectors of Texas and New Mexico history but tells an independent story. It is a story more typical than mythic, one involving the perseverance of people in a harsh physical environment, of transience by native peoples and early immigrants, and of settled permanence only following the introduction of post-industrial technologies. The dimensions of American history — both good and bad, laudatory and shameful — are present within its story. So are the universal dimensions of people in any place. This long-forgotten region, remembered usually only for the Lincoln County War that happened on the very edge of the ecological bioregion that is southeast New Mexico and far west Texas, remains outside the primary trajectories of conventional history and myth making.

The story of this region, however, is both instructive and important. The powerful moments of southwestern regional history — the Alamos and the Pueblo Revolts, are rare. Far more indicative of most people's lives in the American West and Southwest is the ongoing struggle to survive in harsh, dry climates, where the values of the humid climes east of the Mississippi River, of the land where irrigation is unnecessary to agriculture, simply do not apply. There on the peripheries of North American settlement, on those marginal spaces that could not support more than a hunting and gathering regime without very powerful trade networks and ties, lies a story of overcoming adversity more powerful and potent than in wetter places, than in locations where fruit trees grow, where strong rivers bless the lands in their immediate vicinity, where life remains a struggle for certain, but not such an endeavor that the very life of its inhabitants and passers-through depends entirely on the vagaries of climate and indeed fate.

At its core, this is a history of a subregion, a peripheral area bounded by the constraints of life in the arid and semi-arid world and defined by the placement of

Carlsbad Caverns National Park, first established as a national monument in 1923, and Guadalupe Mountains National Park, authorized in 1966 and established in 1972. Located east of El Paso and the Rio Grande — the Spanish and Mexican gateway to the north — and west of the Pecos River in one of the most remote sections of Texas and southeastern New Mexico, this subregion was often traversed and rarely settled. People skirted by it or simply passed through, more interested in their passage than in this place that offered so little to eye of Native American, Spanish conquistador, and Anglo-American settlers. The region never contained bounty; what it offered sprang from the hope of human beings of all kinds who envisioned it as more than the scrub desert they beheld, more than the lack of rain and the weak, pale soil that crumbled between their fingers. This place was on the border of the oft-told stories of the past, a part of the dominant currents in the history of pre-contact, Spanish, Mexican, territorial New Mexico, and Texas, but rarely central to the primary historical activities of those times. El Paso to the west, Roswell to the north, Hobbs to the northeast, and Midland-Odessa to the southeast overshadowed the Carlsbad-Guadalupe Mountains region for much of its modern history; these communities and their economic development helped define the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region in the era before the development of the tourism industry.

As did many places without the natural resource base to sustain agriculture and ranching in the nineteenth century, the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region first needed ties to the munificent bounty of the industrial revolution and then a strategy to bring those advantages to the region. The railroad provided the means, and for a while agriculture and ranching played a significant role in the economic health of the region. Yet the benefits the region could offer were few. Even the natural resources that lay beneath the ground — primarily bat guano for fertilizer, oil, natural gas, and potash — were sufficient to sustain individuals, families, and companies, but not enough for the region to develop an Albuquerque or even a Midland-Odessa. Like many similar places before and since, the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region turned to the "sink" of tourism, the place to which communities fall when they find that their existing strategies and the values that underpin them are exhausted. That the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region had spectacular hidden caves that became an American icon for a period, that the Guadalupe Mountains — the result of a great Permian uplift millennia ago — proved a remarkably scenic and sufficiently desolate area to be protected in the federal system as well only served to underscore the area's marginality of other strategies over the long term.

In this context, tourism in the guise of the two national parks became a shadow economy, one on which the region relied but its people often chose to regard as ephemeral, marginal, and sometimes even inconsequential. As elsewhere in the West, people tried to distance themselves from their dependence on tourism; it seemed inherently less substantial than growing crops, raising animals or even mining guano or potash or extracting natural gas and oil. Americans, especially rural Americans, believed that there had to be some tangible output for their work to have both substance and meaning. The malleable "experience" of tourism did not seem to suit that concept. This deep-seeded feeling meant the National Park Service and other federal agencies had to struggle to establish their place in the town of Carlsbad and in the region as a whole. It

was not enough to provide important support for the regional economic spine; the form that the support required also had to square with local values.

This paradoxical arrangement, in which people depend heavily on an industry they seek to deny, has come to characterize the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region. Here in this region that so many traveled through, where entire generations of historical experience could be framed within the saying "they passed through here," is a story so typical in many ways as to become archetypical. Here Native Americans were replaced less because of their threat to Spanish, Mexican, or Anglo society, but because it could be done. Here industries such as irrigation, guano and potash mining, and others rose and fell, sustaining the community and its sense of self, while federal dollars — in the form of National Park Service money; during World War II, military money; and finally in the recent past, money for the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP), a low-level nuclear waste storage facility financed by the Department of Energy — played a tremendous but largely masked role in sustaining the region.

It is this pattern, in this reliance on cornerstones such as Carlsbad Caverns and Guadalupe Mountains national parks, that the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region reveals its importance. This often bereft and largely ignored region has more in common with the rest of the West than most who live elsewhere in the region would care to admit. In the combination of its peripheral nature and its typicality, the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region reveals how closely it is part of the mainstream of the American West's history. It too is dependent; it too seeks to mask that characteristic need with the rhetoric of individuality and independence. The pattern of the history of the Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains region, so long ignored in place of more glamorous tales of romantic places and events, shows a meaning and significance that belies its peripheral status.